

Under Secretary Maria Otero
Remarks at Press Conference
March 29, 2012
Belize City

It is a great pleasure and honor to visit Belize. Although this is not my first time to Belize, it is the first visit in my official capacity as Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights. Our Ambassador tells me that I am the highest level U.S. civilian official to visit Belize in many, many years. This is important to note, because my visit represents the priority that President Obama and Secretary Clinton have in our bilateral partnership.

During my visit, I had the opportunity to meet with government officials and civil society leaders to reaffirm our close partnership with the Belizean people. I have been impressed by the caliber of so many of your dedicated public officials working hard in the ministries, hand in hand with members of civil society, to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing Belize -- from corruption and gang violence to creating economic opportunity for all Belizeans. The United States is pleased that Prime Minister Barrow has prioritized these issues for the second term of his administration, and we look forward to working together to tackle these complex challenges with concrete advancements and results.

Our nations share common aspirations and common challenges, including transnational organized crime, drug trafficking, and threats to human rights for our most vulnerable populations. We are also natural allies: vigorous democracies with diverse, immigrant populations and a shared commitment to building a peaceful and prosperous future for our citizens.

When President Obama visited El Salvador last March, he announced the Central American Citizen Security Partnership. This partnership recognizes that a secure and prosperous Central America is in the interests of all Central Americans and of the United States. Through our partnership the U.S. is committed to supporting Belize and other governments of the region to create safer streets and capable public institutions, combat corruption and impunity, strengthen respect for human rights, especially for those most vulnerable groups in society such as women and members of the LGBT community.

To fulfill our partnership goals, the United States is providing significant assistance through our Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Through CARSI, we have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to disrupt criminal networks, build investigative and prosecutorial capacity, and implement violence prevention programs for vulnerable communities. For example, this morning I had the opportunity to visit the Yabra Community Policing Center which is working to advance not only law enforcement capacity but to help build up communities that are safe and secure.

Our bilateral collaboration has resulted in significant achievements. The Belize Coast Guard has been an excellent partner with the United States, putting U.S. training and equipment to very good use. In November 2011, a dedicated customs official, immediately after completing training with a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol team visiting Belize, used that training and specialized equipment to stop a truck that was trying to smuggle more than 100 kilograms of cocaine across the border into Mexico.

I would also like to congratulate Belize for its efforts to combat trafficking in persons. We applaud the successful prosecution of two human trafficking cases earlier this year - the first such convictions in Belize in several years - and we encourage the Belizean government to finalize passage of a new stronger TIP law. We also hope Belize will continue its efforts to combat gender-based violence and to provide greater opportunities and alternatives to violence for at-risk youth.

The United States also looks forward to addressing some of these key issues with Belize at the upcoming Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia. On behalf of President Obama and Secretary Clinton, I want to extend my deepest gratitude for the kind and warm welcome of the Belizean people.

Thank you.